

Makhnovists "beyond the rapids": The Zaporozhian Cossack influence



Sean Patterson on the relationship between the Russian revolution-era anarchist movement the Makhnovists and the Zaporozhian Cossacks.

At the Historical Museum in Dnipropetrovsk an unassuming note dated November 27th 1919 bears the signature of Bat'ko Makhno. The note, promising security and financial assistance to the museum, was issued to the famous historian of the Zaporozhian Cossacks and then museum director Dmytro Yavornytsky. Beyond these details contained in the note the meeting of Yavornytsky and Makhno has receded into the realm of popular lore. According to legend, the Makhnovist counterintelligence came to the Yavornytsky's home demanding he open the museum to fulfill necessary 'contributions'. Understanding the seriousness of the situation Yavornytsky demanded an audience with Makhno who in turn requested a tour of the museum. During the tour, Makhno, quite fascinated by the exhibitions, requested an ancient Cossack drinking bottle as a present. In later renditions this bottle is described as an 'elixir of life' capable of giving immortality to its drinker. [12, p. 114] Yavornytsky protested arguing the museum owned only two such artifacts. Makhno apparently responded by saying "For history one bottle of vodka is enough," and took the bottle for himself. Makhno then asked to see the sword of a famous Hetman. Not to be fooled twice, Yavornytsky directed the Bat'ko's attention towards a rusty artifact. In all, the visit was kindly and Makhno even refers to the director as "friend" in his security note. The following day fourteen cartloads of coal were delivered to the museum to help Yavornytsky through the winter months. As a final request Yavornytsky was asked to lecture on the Zaporozhian Cossacks to the Makhnovist army staff. Unfortunately the lecture was never held as Makhno was soon forced to evacuate the city. [5]

The Yavornytsky-Makhno meeting is a fascinating blend of history and folk memory illustrative of how the Zaporozhian heritage contributed to the Makhnovist identity. Arthur L. Adams writes: "Any effort to identify the motives of the peasant rebellions of 1918-1920 must begin with a consideration of the most powerful and glorious of all Ukrainian



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Adams writes: “Any effort to identify the motives of the peasant rebellions of 1918-1920

must begin with a consideration of the most powerful and glorious of all Ukrainian

traditions—that of the Zaporozhian Cossacks.” [1, p. 249] Particularly for the peasant rank and file, their movement was intimately linked to the unique historical traditions of the Zaporozhian Host. The Zaporozhian tradition is a critical recurring theme in the Makhnovist narrative. It served as a wellspring of collective cultural memory and encouraged the social cohesion of the movement via references to a shared history, culture, and characteristic libertarian impulse.

Eighteenth century southern Ukraine was largely an unconquered territory. Ostensibly claimed by the Ottoman and Russian Empires, southern Ukraine in reality functioned as a grand refuge for peasants and outcasts seeking to escape the reach of lord and state. Voline writes that “thus for centuries, the Ukraine was the promised land of fugitives of every kind.”

[16, p. 545] Beginning in the 15th century peasants that fled to the borderlands [ukraina] in search of ‘the free life’ [vol’nitsa] came to be called Cossacks. Derived from the south Turkic word qazak, or adventurer, in the Ukrainian context it came to refer to “the free, masterless man who lacked a well-defined place in society and who lived on its unsettled periphery.”

[15, p. 108]. The Cossacks formed confraternities, or hosts, based around the Don and Dnieper rivers. These exclusively male encampments were open to all Christians irrespective of social background and members were free to leave at their own behest.

The most fiercely independent of the Cossacks was the Zaporozhian Host. This group established their capital, or Sich, “beyond the rapids” [za porogy] in the islands of the lower Dnieper, near what would become the city of Alexandrovsk (modern day Zaporozhye).

Voline describes the Zaporozhians as “men in love with liberty” who had “struggled for centuries against the attempts at enslavement by various neighbours.” [16, p. 544] The physical location of the host was integral to their free way of life providing a natural defence against Russians and Poles to the north and Turkic Tatars to the south. By the mid-17th century the Zaporozhians occupied an independent buffer zone in what would later become the provinces of Ekaterinoslav and Kherson. [8, p. 15] It is telling that the Zaporozhian and Makhnovist regions of influence correspond to a great extent.

While the Zaporozhians were great allies in war, they were considered a disruptive presence during peacetime by the imperial powers. Frequently the Cossacks rose in rebellion, with the surrounding peasantry following suit “as if to an arranged signal.” [9, p. 181] The last centuries of Zaporozhian independence witnessed the famous Cossack rebellions of Stenka Razin, Bohdan Khmelnytsky and Emelian Pugachev. The Zaporozhian Sich also served as a supply and recruitment base for the right-bank haidamaky movement in their struggle against the Polish nobility. (15, 192) Despite their resistance to all outsiders, an encroaching Russian Empire gradually eroded Cossack independence through the cooption of the leadership and the recognition of special rights in return for military service. Those who refused these terms were violently repressed. Using Pugachev’s rebellion as a pretext, Catherine the Great ordered the Zaporozhian Sich destroyed in 1775. In the process, the Zaporozhian leadership was exiled. Some relocated to the Kuban region while the remaining population was gradually enserfed.

While never able to recover their former way of life, the spirit of volnitsa continued to flow through the veins of the toiling peasantry. Nationalist author L. Vynar, no friend to Makhno, was of the opinion that, “[Gulyai Polye's] inhabitants are mostly descendants of the old Cossack times, who have down to

the present preserved the true Zaporozhian traditions.” [11, p. xx] The majority of Makhnovists descended directly from the Zaporozhians Cossacks and retained a strong cultural memory of their history through folk tales and song.

A specifically Zaporozhian tradition evolved over time, described by Adams as “a genuine egalitarianism, an anarchistic love of personal freedom that expressed itself in a profound

distrust of all authority, and a proud tradition that, when a true Cossack is oppressed, he will rebel and fight with a fine disregard for consequences.” [1, p. 249] Integral to the Zaporozhian way of life was an early form of direct democracy, in which atamany [military chiefs] were elected at open councils [rady]. All Cossacks, regardless of their socioeconomic status, were free to participate in these often-boisterous elections. In contrast to their cousins on the right-bank of the Dnieper, the Zaporozhians experienced less social inequality and more restrictions on the power of their atamany in peacetime.

The Zaporozhians’ love of freedom could even extend to peoples outside their clan. In an event foreshadowing Makhnovist practices, the Zaporozhians released thousands of Turkish slaves in 1616 during a raid on Kaffa in the Crimea. [15, p. 112] All social outcasts and runaways seeking the free life were welcome to join the host. More surprisingly, and out of step with the other hosts, the Zaporozhians accepted Jews into their ranks. [9, 56] In his time Makhno would consciously adopt a policy of friendship towards Jews. The movement benefited from the participation of numerous Jewish intellectuals and ethnically Jewish battalions.

For Voline and Arshinov the influence of the Cossack heritage on the evolution of Ukrainian psychology cannot be underestimated. All three of our main sources for the Makhnovist narrative invoke Zaporozhian traditions as central to the indigenous development of the movement. Arshinov considered the presence of “the traditions of the Vol’nitsa ... preserved from ancient times” as the most important Ukrainian factor facilitating the rise of the Makhnovshchina. [2, p. 50] For Voline the historical presence of the Zaporozhian tradition and its preservation in the memory of the peasantry through the years of enserfment is proof of a qualitative difference between the Ukrainian and Russian peasantry:

Certain parts of the Ukraine never allowed themselves to be wholly subjugated, as had happened in Great Russia. Their population always preserved a spirit of

independence, of resistance, of popular rebellion. Relatively cultivated and refined, individualistic and capable of taking the initiative without flinching, jealous of his independence, warlike by tradition, ready to defend himself and accustomed, for centuries, to feel free and his own master, the Ukrainian was in general never subjugated to that total slavery – not only of the body but also of the spirit – characterized the population of the rest of Russia. [16, p. 544]

All factions of the civil war recognized the Makhnovshchina's distinct Zaporozhian spirit.

Anarchist Josef Gotman, remarked that, "in [Makhno's] veins flowed the blood of Zaporog Cossack ancestors renowned for their independent spirit and fighting qualities." [3] The White General A. Shkuro, remarked of the Makhnovists that they "take pride in calling themselves "Cossacks" and fantasize about re-establishing the Zaporozhian [Host]." Passing through Ekaterinoslav the peasants voiced their support of Makhno saying, "it doesn't matter whether we're Ukrainians or Russians, just that we're Cossacks." [13, Chapter 22] The Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai wrote that "the village of Guylai-Polye took the form of a form of a fortified camp, reminiscent of old Zaporozhye." [Pravda February 14, 1919, cited in 4] Likewise, during a May 1919 visit to Guylai-Polye, L. Kamenev's assistant recalled that he felt as though he had been "transported back among the Zaporogs of the 18th century."

[cited in 14, p. 292] All levels of observers recognized the Zaporozhian influence. For example, in March 1919 the Supreme Military Inspectorate observed that, "Parts of Makhno's army are strongly imbued with the spirit and traditions of a free Zaporozhye."

[cited in 4]

For Makhno himself, the Zaporozhian heritage was integral to his identity. He writes in his memoirs:

My mother often told me about the lives of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, about their free communes in the old days. I had once read Gogol's novel Taras Bulba and was thrilled with the customs and traditions of the people of those times. But it never occurred to me that the day would come when I would feel myself their heir, and they would become for me a source of inspiration for the rebirth of this free country. [Makhno, A Rebellious Youth, 33]

During the agrarian disturbances of 1905 Makhno's comrade A. Semenyuta would rally the local anarchist-communist group with the words: "A big cheer to you, children of the people, famous great-grandsons of the Cossacks!" [4] Peasant delegates from the region to the All Russian Peasant Congress in November 1905 similarly stated: "In our people there lives to this day that sense of freedom which was found among the Zaporozhian Cossacks." [cited in 8, p. 236]

Nevertheless, Makhno was not one to romanticize the Cossack's traditional role. He was well aware that the Cossacks over time had become "tools of the ruling class." Makhno reflects in his memoirs:

Ever since they settled ages ago on the Don and Donetz, along the Kuban and the Terek, they had been the butchers of any attempt by labour to free itself. Yes, the Cossacks throughout their history had been the executioners for the toilers of Russia. Many of them had already realized this, but many still went to meet the revolutionary toilers with sabre and whip in hand. [10, 143].

At a February 1918 General Assembly in Gulyai-Polye Makhno describes the gathering as

"truly of the old 'Zaporozhian Sich' as we knew it from history books" but added as a caveat that "the peasants were not as credulous as in olden times and they no longer met to discuss questions of church and faith." [10, 174] For Makhno the Zaporozhians were a source of inspiration but not immune from criticism.

The organization of the Makhnovist army also echoed its Zaporozhian past. Military commanders at all levels were elected and commonly referred to as atamany. Likewise, according to V. Chop, Makhno's title of Bat'ko betrays a clear Zaporozhian influence. [4]

Makhno's elite "black sotnia [hundred]" is also a traditional Zaporozhian term for a regimental unit. Additionally, many of the Makhnovists' tactical maneuvers were distinctly Cossack.

Despite its clear influence on the Makhnovshchina any appeal to a common Zaporozhian heritage is conspicuously absent from the movement's propaganda. Indeed, even in a June 1920 appeal to the Don and Kuban Cossacks there is no mention of a common heritage, they are simply appealed to as labouring peoples.

[2, p. 270-273] Some commentators have interpreted this as evidence that the Zaporozhian-Makhnovist connection is exaggerated, or an artificial attempt to harmonize Ukrainian history. [7, p. 526; 4] However, as is evident, participants and observers were keenly aware of the movement's Zaporozhian inspiration. A possible explanation is that Makhnovist propaganda was commonly produced by non-peasant anarchist intellectuals. Many members of the cultural-educational department were urban Jews who would not have shared the rank-and-file peasant's common Zaporozhian heritage.

As such, the Makhnovist vision was expressed in the more universal language of revolutionary anarchism as opposed to the culturally limited, and potentially chauvinistic, language of Zaporozhian cossackdom. Furthermore, there is evidence that the peasant leadership also consciously adopted this attitude. None of the movement's early proclamations mention Zaporozhian heritage. From the beginning the Makhnovshchina sought to include all exploited peoples of the region and thus avoided ethnically exclusive rhetoric. Makhno himself actively opposed any manifestations of national chauvinism and would have frowned upon any attempt to rally the troops around ethnic traditions. His

language, and the movement as a whole, was based on the common heritage of the toiling worker, regardless of ethnicity, language or religion.

Particularly illuminating is the proclamation entitled "1654". Published November 27th 1919

in the Ukrainian-language Makhnovist daily *Shliakh do Voli* [Road to Freedom], the title refers to the Treaty of Pereyaslav in which Bohdan Khmelnytsky, on the heel of his uprising, accepted the overlordship of Muscovy. The exact intentions of Khmelnytsky are still debated by historians, however for the Makhnovists the treaty was clearly a treasonous affair. In a clear indictment of the treaty, the anonymous author states that a slave is still a slave whether under the rule of Hetman or Tsar. [6, *Shliakh do Voli*, November 27, 1919]. The proclamation exhibits a willingness to critically engage Zaporozhian history and serves as a clear warning against any blind glorification of the Host. It points the reader to a perspective beyond national prejudices and towards a common solidarity through the experience of slavery. Furthermore, it presents a characteristically Makhnovist interpretation of history in which the rebellious masses are consistently betrayed by a privileged leadership.

The Zaporozhian love of freedom was, above all, an indigenous expression. While disrupted by Tsarism this impulse lived on in the soul of the Ukrainian peasantry intermittently enflamed by the agrarian disturbances of the region. In the Makhnovist context, the Zaporozhian tradition provided both a foundation and implicit rationale for the movement's instinctual anarchism. The Makhnovist-Zaporozhian connection is not straightforward but is perhaps best conceptualized as, in the words of I. Kravchenko, a "religion of freedom." Chop explains further:

If we ignore the anarchist slogans in Makhnovist manifestos, the political system of the Makhnovist movement was a romantic attempt to replace modern social relations with an idealized popular fantasy borrowed from Cossack times, which would allow people to find fraternal equality and personal freedom. Anarchism was only a modern 20th century formulation, which embodied similar values. Its doctrine, with its references to the methods of science, offered a way to make this dream a reality, while downplaying its utopianism. [4]

As a narrative thread the Zaporozhian heritage operates in the substrata of the Makhnovist story: implicit in the movement's common language of the movement but never explicitly propagandized. At a fundamental level anarchism and Zaporozhian Cossackdom are profoundly complementary, functioning to narratively link the past with the present.

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